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AUTHOR Lockavitch, Joseph F., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of environmental factors--namely, classroom seating--to classroom management. A specific incident is discussed, whereby disruptive behavior developed in students because of the spatial separation of their desks from the teacher's desk. Solutions to the seating problem are offered in the text and in figures drawn for use by the reader. The paper concludes that effective use of the environment can greatly assist teachers in keeping their classes under control. (Author/LD)

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Seating Arrangement and Classroom Behavior: A Simple but Sometimes Overlooked Method for Classroom Control

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Submitted by

Joseph F. Lockavitch, Jr. EdD

Sacred Heart College

Belmont, North Carolina 28012

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The purpose of this article is to illustrate the importance of environmental manipulation (classroom seating and spatial arrangement) to classroom management. In too many instances, it is overlooked. Such an oversight is a serious mistake because it might be eliminating a simple and direct solution to the problem. The following incident illustrates such an example.

The incident occurred while I was supervising a student intern in our undergraduate special education program. The intern was doing her practicum in a self-contained classroom for learning disabled students in an elementary school. The school was located in a large metropolitan school system.

When I arrived the intern was attempting to have a reading lesson with five boys in the classroom. All the participants were seated at opposite sides of one large rectangular table. This large table was made up of two smaller tables that were put along side of each other. Figure 1 illustrates the seating arrangement.

The intern was having great difficulty with group management. The boys were involved in a variety of non-acceptable classroom behaviors. They were constantly berating each other, and one student in particular. The abuse that this one boy suffered was verbal as well as physical. The student intern was perplexed because she could not control the situation. Everytime she tried to calm down or control one of the students, the others acted up. She was at her wits end and completely frustrated as to what to do.

After the session had ended, the intern and I discussed the problem. Her main difficulty (as she saw it) centered on trying to attend to all of the students at one time. She stated that "Everytime

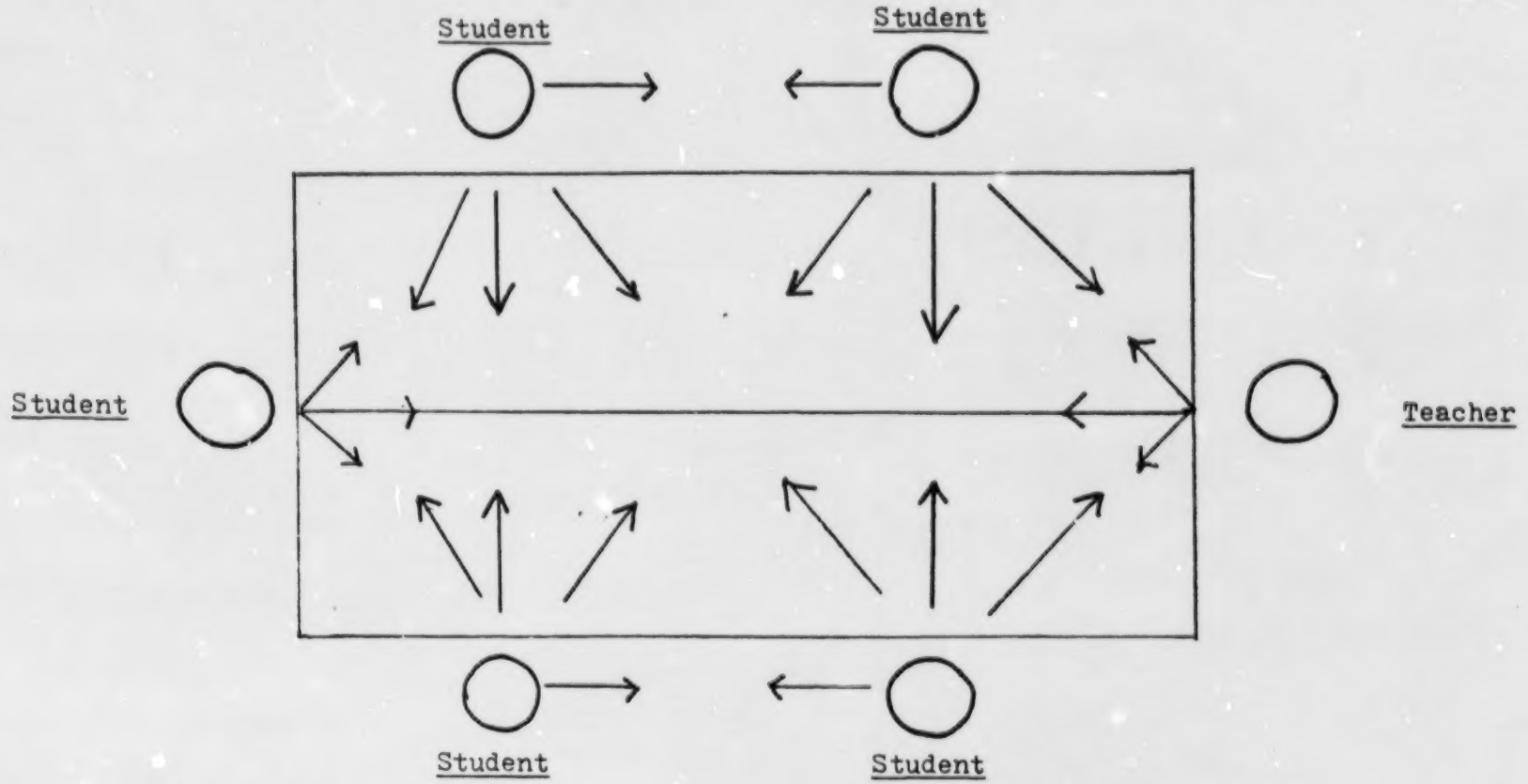


Figure 1 The seating arrangement of the student intern's reading group.

I tried to deal with one of them, the others immediately began to act up. It was as if they knew that they would be safe because I could not possibly deal with them while I was with the other student. I was on a carousel and they knew it. I was never so frustrated in my life. Short of growing two additional sets of arms and legs, what could I have done?"

The student was familiar with the principles of behavior management. We discussed the behavior and reasons why such behavior took place and how it might be handled in the future. During the discussion, the intern stated that she generally had no difficulty with the students individually and that the unacceptable behavior usually occurred in small groups such as this or when they were expected to be studying at their desks. As the intern put it, "Everytime I tried working at my desk (situated in the front of the room; see Figure 2) something would happen. Again it was as if they were watching for when they had a chance to become disruptive. As soon as I put my head down to attend to my own work, it would start. You could have set your watch by it, and the only way I controlled it was by stopping my own work and monitoring them. What else could I have done?"

The solution that we arrived at dealt with environmental manipulation. In looking at the seating arrangement of the reading group, we were able to see that the arrangement itself was playing a large part in the group dynamics that were taking place. Because all the students were seated facing each other, there was little opportunity for 'visual privacy'. The students literally had two options. They could attempt to attend exclusively to their books (a task that many found uncomfortable even for the shortest period of time) or they

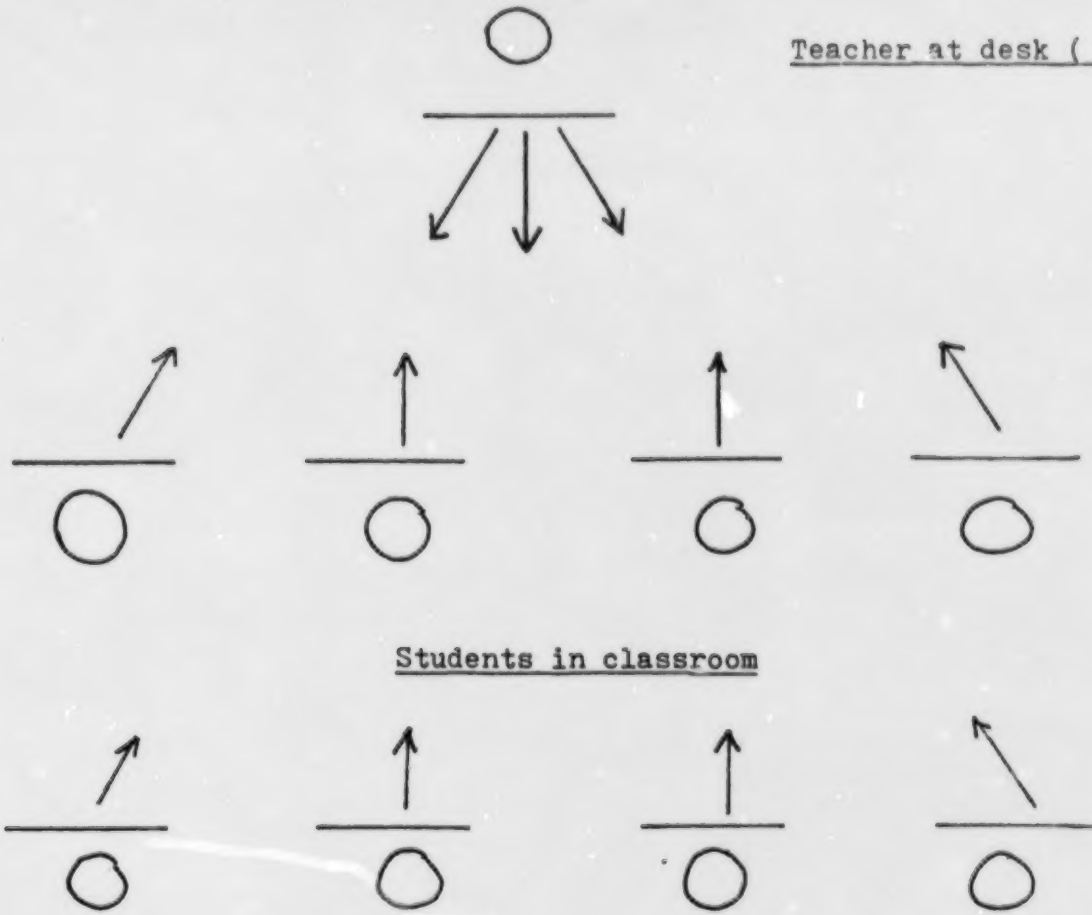


Figure 2. The teacher and class seating arrangement during study period.

could look at each other. Since many chose the latter option, the chances for a confrontation increased dramatically. Comments such as, "Who are you looking at?", "What's your trouble?", or "Get your eyes off me", were heard.

It was decided that a rearrangement of the seating and furniture might help to remedy the situation. Figure 3 shows the new seating arrangement. The two smaller rectangular table were separated and placed in front of a wall or a partition. An additional desk was added (for the boy who seemed the main target of the criticism) and placed in front of another divider. The intern was situated in the center of the group. By doing this, she was able to attend to any one student quickly and easily. The students were no longer able to monitor the intern's actions with the ease and security that they had had in their prior arrangement.

The solution to the study period situation also involved seating and, in particular, the location of the teacher's desk. In the initial arrangement, the students could monitor the teachers' behavior as easily as the teacher could monitor theirs. In fact, it was probably easier for the students. They knew exactly when they could act up simply by seeing what the teacher was doing. If her head was down, it meant that she was busy working and not watching them, and all they had to do to gain this information was to glance up.

By moving her desk to the back of the room (see Figure 4), the intern was able to take control of the situation. She could now easily monitor them, but they could no longer reciprocate. A quick glance at the teacher's desk would no longer be sufficient. From now on, the student would have to also turn around, and such an action would cause attention and a quick reaction from their teacher.

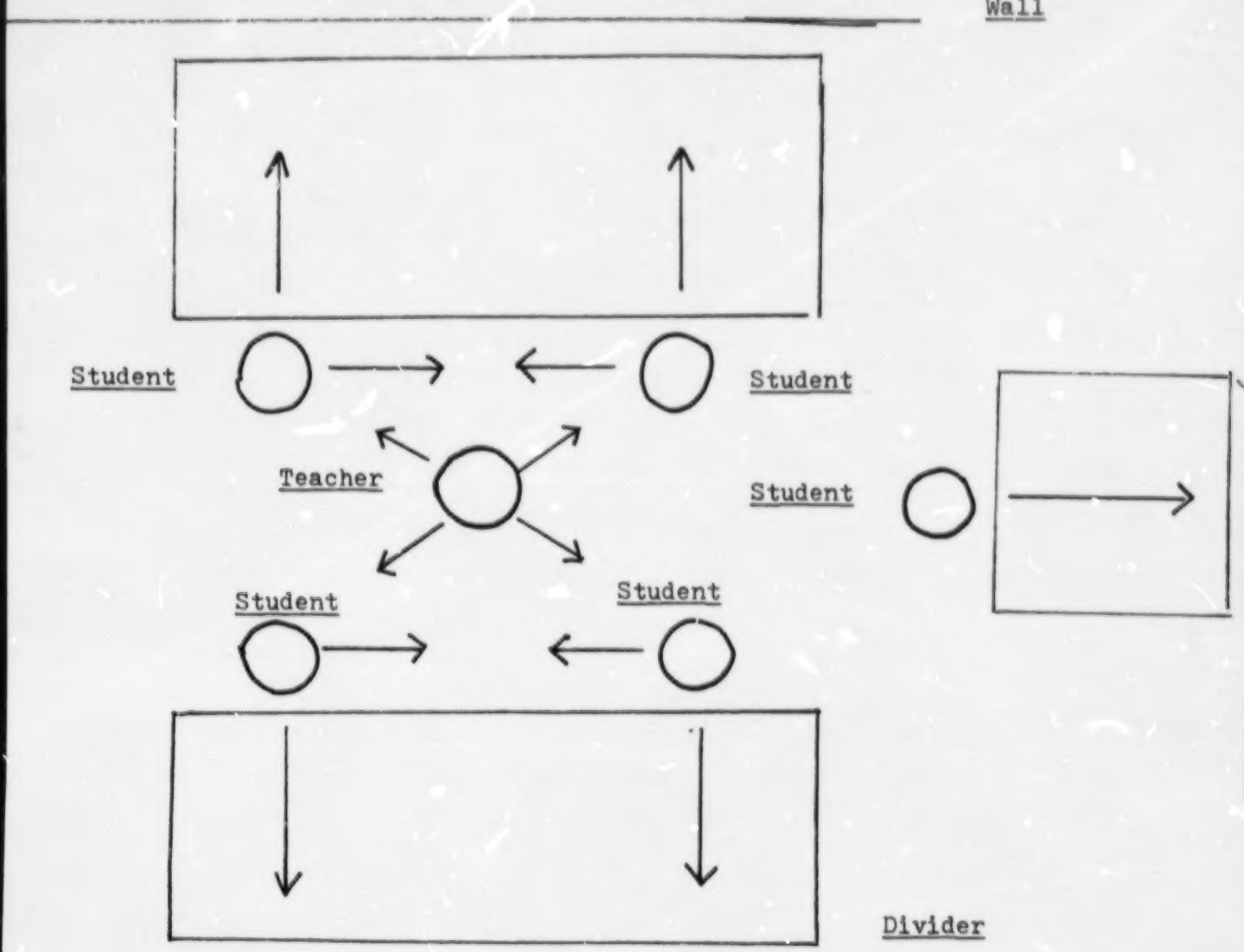


Figure 3. The seating rearrangement of the reading group.

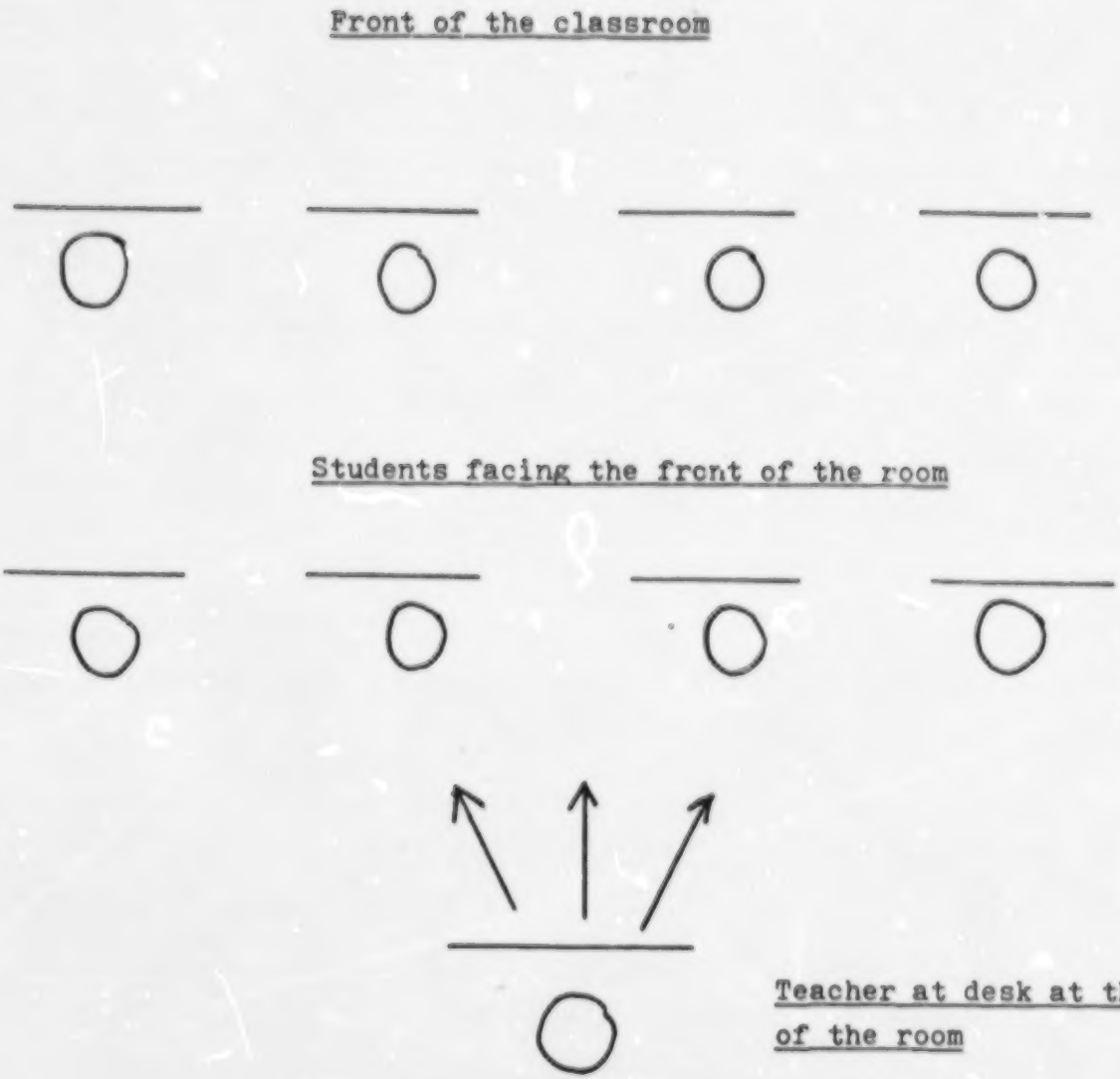


Figure 4. Illustration of the new study period seating arrangement.

The results achieved through the classroom rearrangement were positive. The student intern quickly became more in control of the situation and the students became more attentive and less disruptive.

Environmental manipulation should be considered for individual as well as group problems. For many children, where they sit in the room can affect their behavior. The case of John illustrates this.

John is a ten-year-old student in a self-contained classroom for children with behavior disorders. One of John's main difficulties was inattentiveness. John was always attending to things other than what was expected of him. His teacher described him as very 'spacey'. "He never stays with a task. Whenever I look over at John, his eyes are always wandering. I know he is capable of doing the work because he has done the same work with me individually at my desk. The problem usually occurs only when he goes back to his desk."

Figure 5 illustrates the classroom arrangement and the location of John's desk. By placing the seats in the center of the classroom, the instructor has unintentionally compounded her problem. By being in the center of the class, John is constantly being bombarded by visual stimuli. This stimuli (the students around him, the ceiling above, the decoration on the walls, the things happening outside, ect.) was coming from every direction. For the average child such a situation is hard to control, but for John, it was next to impossible. John was trying to attend to everything and because of this, he was not able to attend to anything for any sufficient length of time.

The solution? - cut down on the visual stimuli. How? - by changing John's seat. Figure 6-A shows the new seating arrangement. By placing John in front of the wall, the immediate impact was to cut down or control that stimuli that was coming from both the front,

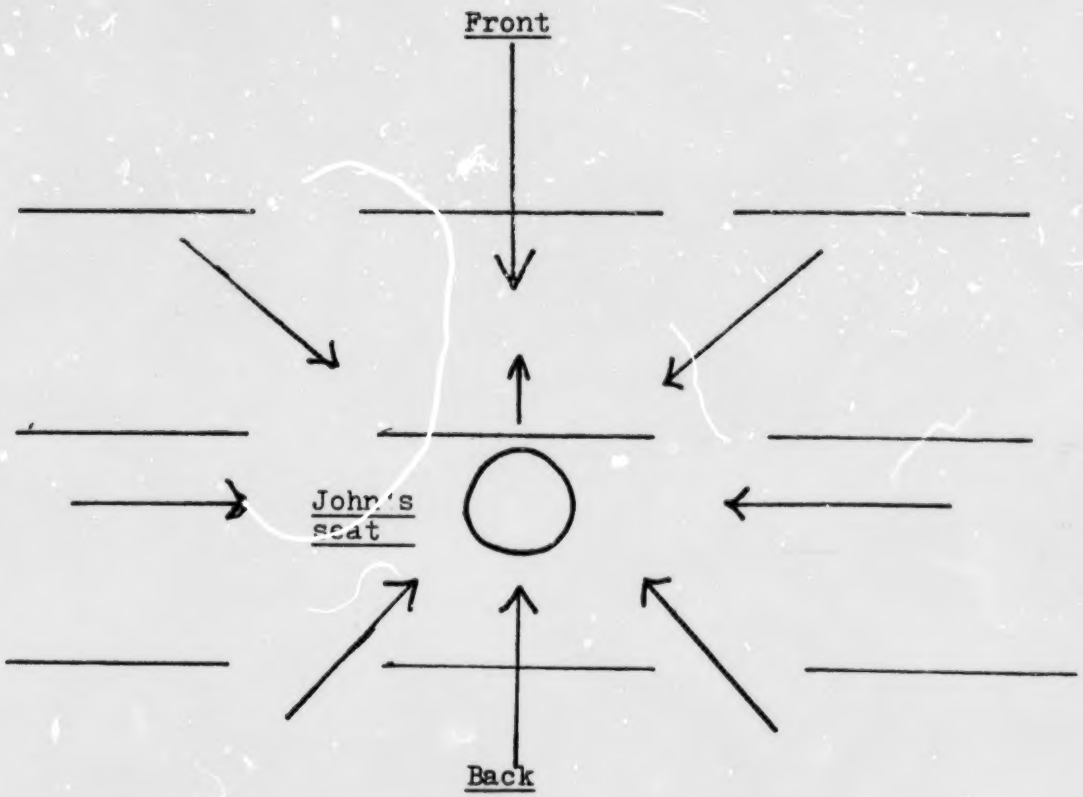
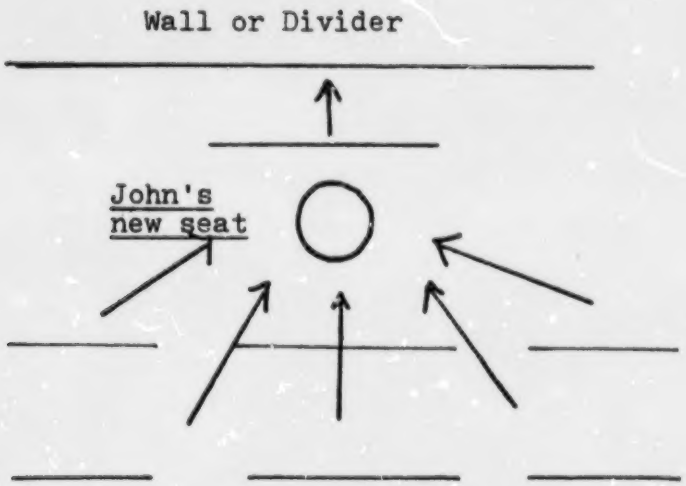
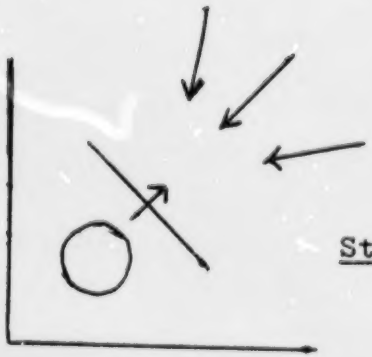


Figure 5. Illustration of John's original seat in the center of the class.



(A)



(B)

Figure 6. (A) John's new seating arrangement ; (B) Seating arrangement of a child facing out from the corner of the classroom.

back, and the sides, and therefore placing John in a less frustrating situation.

For other children, placing them in a corner (facing the class, not the corner) will also aid by controlling stimuli from the sides and back. Figure 6-B illustrates such a situation. In summary, effective use of the environment can greatly assist the classroom teacher in reducing serious classroom management difficulties. It is neither the sole nor most important way to achieve greater control, but it is an area that has been greatly overlooked.